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ABSTRACT

A study examined the ways in which college readers interact with literary texts. The method of interviews and think-along protocols, in which a text was read aloud by the subject while he simultaneously verbalized his thoughts, was used to compare the reading processes of eight college freshman to those of eight masters students in literature who have larger stores of discipline-specific knowledge and a repertoire of strategies for approaching a text. The results indicated differences in the following areas: (1) the ways that readers made inferences in order to fill in missing information in a text; (2) the ways that readers respond to what Iser has called the "repertoire" of the text; and (3) the readers' ability to vary their perspective as they were reading the text. (KEH)

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CREATING THE VIRTUAL WORK:

READERS' PROCESSES IN UNDERSTANDING LITERARY TEXTS

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What happens when readers read literature? There is certainly no lack of theorizing on this subject; we have over the years become familiar with readers who are variously described as being implied readers, informed readers, mock readers, intended readers, competent readers, superreaders, and so on. When I thought about those readers, who admittedly are theoretical constructs, I wondered what connection there was between that rather exalted company and the twenty-eight somewhat different readers I typically faced in a writing-about-literature classroom. Where, for example, Stanley Fish's "informed reader" is a competent speaker, in full possession of semantic knowledge, who has internalized the properties of literary discourse, some of my students thought the author of "Araby" was a woman named Joyce James, they were hard pressed to tell me in which country Dublin was located, and felt that the boy was disappointed in the bazaar because it "reminded him of a dead church." The gulf separating my readers from those readers seemed rather large, so I decided, as part of a research study, to use this notion of the theoretical reader to explore the ways in which some real college readers interacted with literary texts.

I was interested in college freshmen as a population, and I decided to compare their reading processes to those of masters students in literature who, while still not the idealized readers of theory, have larger stores of discipline-specific knowledge and a repertoire of strategies for approaching a text. I used sixteen readers in the study, all from the same state university, eight freshmen and eight masters students. Each reader worked

with the same four texts, two short stories and two poems. I obtained information on their reading processes by the method of think-aloud protocols; what this means, in reading, is that I gave a reader a text, a poem, say, and asked them to read the poem out loud, line by line, and simultaneously talk about all the things that were going through their heads as they were reading. So they would begin talking as soon as they read the title, and they were to try to verbalize as much of what was going on in their heads as they possibly could, taking as much time as they wanted to do so. This verbalization took the form of connections the readers were making, to their own lives or to other works of literature, questions they had about the text, hypotheses they were forming, and so on. In addition to the think-aloud protocols, I also collected other kinds of information: I asked readers probing questions about their understanding of the texts, and I asked follow-up questions at the next session after inviting readers to take the works home and read them again, and finally at the last session, I interviewed the readers about their knowledge of reading in general, of reading literature in particular, and about their experiences in and out of school with literature.

I looked at the protocols from two perspectives, first from the angle of cognitive psychology and reading theory, to examine readers' thinking strategies, and second, from the perspective of literary theory, to look at how readers actually interacted with the texts, and this is what I'd like to focus on today.

To organize my thinking, I used the work of Wolfgang Iser

and of Louise Rosenblatt, because their ideas of the ways that readers come to understand literary texts mesh rather nicely with the work of reading researchers. In addition, they allowed me to focus on both the reader and the text, and on the interaction, or transaction, that takes place somewhere between the two.

What the reader creates out of a text is, in Iser's terms, the "virtual work," and in Rosenblatt's, simply, the "poem." This new aesthetic entity, composed by the reader from the text, is in Rosenblatt's words, "an event in time"--it is not static, but rather an "active, self-ordering and self-corrective process." The nature of this event will be affected by a number of different characteristics and abilities that the reader brings to the transaction, including background knowledge, experience with literature, understanding of the reading process, and so on.

My goal, when working with the protocols, was to see if the two groups, college freshmen and masters students, showed characteristic ways of interacting with the texts in the study; although we could predict with confidence that freshmen, as a group, would work with the texts differently than the masters students would, what form would those differences take? There was certainly variation within the groups, among individuals, but I also found a great deal of variation between the groups, in the ways that they interacted with short stories and poems, and I was able to describe in some detail what those differences were.

During my study of the protocols, three areas seemed particularly important: 1) the ways that readers made inferences in order to fill in missing information in a text, 2) the ways that readers responded to what Iser has called the "repertoire" of the

text, and 3) the readers' ability to vary their perspective as they were reading the text.

Those texts we think of as literary, as opposed to expository, require a particularly active reader because they are not, as a rule, explicit, because a great deal of information is left out and must be filled in by the reader. At this point, according to Iser, communication in the reading process begins, when the reader works to fill in what the text has left unsaid. This information can be relatively easy or more difficult to generate; to go back to "Araby" for a moment, this might be the difference between figuring out how old the boy is, on the one hand, and on the other, deciding why, exactly, his "eyes burned with anguish and anger" at the end of the story. In my study, I looked at what the freshmen and masters students did in order to fill in gaps, as Iser calls them, and I found some differences between the two groups.

In general, when there is a lot of groundwork laid in the text, and explicit cues that readers can respond to, freshmen and masters students fill gaps in much the same way. Let me give you an example. In one story my readers worked with, a doctor comes home wearing a fur coat that belongs to his friend, a judge, and his wife greets him in a darkened hallway with the words, "Gustav isn't home yet." The doctor, whose name is Gustav, replies, "Yes, he's home." This brief scene is followed by white space, a literal gap, and the incident receives no further elaboration in the story. Most of the readers in both groups filled in the missing information here in exactly the same way, deciding that

the wife was having an affair with the owner of the borrowed fur coat, and they used a number of pieces of information in the story to reach that conclusion: 1) the doctor is wearing his friend's coat; 2) the hallway is unlit; 3) the judge is expected for Christmas dinner; 4) as a young girl the wife had been fond of the judge, but he refused to marry her; and 5) she had recently grown cold toward her husband. Neither group of readers had trouble working with this gap, for which there had been a great deal of preparation in the text.

But another kind of gap, in which much in the text had been left unsaid, proved more difficult for the freshmen to fill. One of the study's poems began as follows:

> On a Sabbath eve at dusk on a summer day
> when I was a child
> when the odors of food and prayer drifted up from all the houses
> and the wings of the Sabbath angels rustled in the air,
> I began to lie to my father:
> "I went to another synagogue."

Fifteen out of the study's sixteen readers stopped at this point, where an important inference needs to be made: Since the lines indicate that "I went to another synagogue" is a lie, the speaker must not have done that. Why did he lie? What did he do? All of the masters students worked on filling in the missing information, and all eight ultimately reached the same conclusion; the speaker did not go to synagogue at all, he no longer wanted to go, and he lied to keep his father from knowing the truth. One masters student imagines the scene between father and son:

It sounds like an excuse to me. An answer to the question that you don't hear the father ask--"Why weren't you in synagogue? Why didn't we see you there?"

Although the majority of freshmen also stopped at this point in the poem, their comments reveal that they are not making the same inference the masters students made. Only two decide that the speaker has not done what he said he did; the other six do not attempt to fill in the missing information. In fact, they appear to accept "I went to another synagogue" as a true statement, and go on with the poem. And since the poem does not elaborate on this initial incident further, the majority of freshmen were left confused about the rest of the poem. The conclusions that freshmen came to about several of the works differed greatly because of the variation in the ways that the two groups filled in missing information.

Another area in which the freshmen and masters students interacted with the texts very differently has to do with what Iser has called the repertoire of the texts. This is all of a story's or poem's references to reality, to a world that exists outside the literary text. It includes, but is not limited to, references to real people, real places, historical times, other works of literature, and also the mores and values that are represented in the text. So, to stick with the example I used before, in "Araby" some elements of the repertoire would be Dublin, the Christian Brothers school, The Abbot by Walter Scott, O'Donovan Rossa, and so on, all of which, by pointing to things outside the story, contribute in a very important way to our understanding of it, if we have the prior knowledge to make use

of them, and if we move toward determining their significance. It was very clear, when I looked at my readers, that while the repertoire was something that masters students made great use of, freshmen hardly noticed it at all.

Masters students readily note a story's setting in time and place. One story I used, "Memorial Day," by Peter Cameron, has a direct link between the story's setting and the theme; both freshmen and masters students were likely to comment that Memorial Day is a time for reflection, and to notice that the main character of the story is doing a lot of remembering. But for freshmen the connection stops there, while masters students go on to develop the significance of the holiday for the theme, and for several it became a central point in their understanding of the story. One masters student's discussion illustrates this point:

> Memorial Day is a time the dead are remembered, what's gone, lost, and that's clearly what Stephen is doing. Also, the day is significant because it's when he successfully becomes an adult, and that's memorialized. Martial images, too, connected with the holiday, suggest a test or trial, though I'm not sure of the relationship yet. It's a kind of battle he's successfully gotten through.

This masters student noted several other instances of martial imagery in the story, and together with the Memorial Day reference, these formed a major building block in her understanding of the story.

Freshmen, while likely to note the Memorial Day setting, did not attempt to arrive at its significance, and their comments on it remain superficial. One freshman says, "When he talks about Memorial Day, maybe he's remembering things that happened. Mem-

orial Day, you remember something." One student, noticing the title at the beginning of her reading, commented that the story may be "about a person who has had some connection with someone who has died," and later says that Memorial Day is a day for reflection, but these ideas never become integrated in any way into her discussion of the story.

Masters students are also likely to stop and comment on very brief references in the works. In the same "Memorial Day" story, the main character watches his stepfather pull a trowel from the ground and says, simply, "I thought of King Arthur." All eight masters students found this noteworthy--as one masters student said, "If he's going to think of King Arthur, I have to think of King Arthur"--and for several, again, this brief reference became an important part of their understanding of the boy's character. Freshmen, in contrast, made little use of this element of the text's repertoire. Five freshmen passed it without comment, and the remarks of the freshmen who noted it are brief--in response to the character's line, "I thought of King Arthur," Jim asked, "Why?", Kristi commented, "I don't know why he said that," and Kurt said, "Oh, something like the sword Excalibur, maybe. I can't see how that would be."

While masters students are highly sensitive to the potential of these references to the world outside the text, freshmen appear not to be. By missing these small but significant parts of a literary text, freshmen may also miss significant qualities of characters or fruitful avenues to thematic insights. In some cases, freshmen may simply not have the background knowledge they

need to begin the process. It is also possible that freshmen simply do not understand the importance of such references; my sense throughout the study is that freshmen do not see a story or poem as resulting from conscious choices on a writer's part, and do not realizes that consideration of these choices by a reader will often lead to a richer understanding of the work.

Finally, I looked at readers' ability to assume varying perspectives while reading a text. All of the works in the study invited readers to, following Iser's notion, occupy various positions while interacting with the text, and again we find the masters students easily doing so. This process of viewing a text from varying perspectives can occur in a number of ways: readers may change perspective over time, may view a text from two very different perspectives, or may sense multiple, related perspectives simultaneously. Let me bring this down to earth with a few examples.

One way masters students changed perspectives over time occurred when they came to see a main character as being an unreliable source of information. This happened in both the short stories; while reading "Memorial Day," for example, masters students began to make comments such as, "I'm not sure how much I completely trust his [the main character's] perceptions," and "It's hard to know what to think because I'm seeing through the eyes of the narrator." In the final assessment, masters students tended to see the main character, a young boy, as immature and selfish, and to feel a certain amount of sympathy for his parents. Freshmen, on the other hand, made a strong identification with the main character, did not change their impression of him

at all during the story, and characterized his parents as being "geeks," "not mature," and "not normal." We might wonder whether this occurred because of the closness of the character's age or situation to those of the freshmen, but the same identification happened with "The Fur Coat," the main character of which was very different from my freshman readers.

One more example. In the poem I mentioned earlier, about the young man not wanting to go to synagogue, masters students sensed a great ambivalence in the speaker that passed the freshmen totally by. The speaker in the poem is clearly an adult who is reflecting on an incident in the past, and masters students saw, in the son's rejection of the father's religion, a juxtaposition of positive and negative imagery. By seeing the poem from both those perspectives, most of the masters students arrived at the conclusion that the poem is <u>about</u> ambivalence, that the young man, though skeptical of his father's religion, is still "haunted by a lost, golden time."

Freshmen reached a very different conclusion about this poem. No freshman sensed any ambivalence on the speaker's part, nor did they comment on any of the positive imagery with which he discusses his father's religion; as a matter of fact, most freshmen believed the speaker did not like his father and feels angry toward him. Thus, because they do not respond to the two perspectives at the same time, the freshmen reach very different conclusions about the poem than do the masters students.

I saw other differences between the ways that freshmen and masters students in my study interacted with texts, but the three

areas that seemed most significant were the ways they filled in missing information, their responses to real-world references in the text, and in their abilities to occupy varying perspectives while reading. The fact that there are differences, of course, should not surprise us; the masters students in this study have clearly had a great deal of training in the interpretation of literature and, as I said at the beginning, have developed particular strategies for accomplishing that task. But we should also remember that freshmen are not exactly novices when it comes to reading stories and poems, for they have been doing it in English and language arts classes since they began school. I think the value for me in this study is that it's given me some idea of the areas in which the differences are most pronounced, and as a teacher this will help me think of things I want to emphasize in the classroom. How much of it we want to emphasize will depend on our purposes--in a general education literature course we may not be so concerned with getting freshmen to read like masters students as we might in an introductory course for English majors. But if we are to help students write better about literature, we must first help them to become better readers, and we can do that by better understanding the way that real students work with real texts.

Works Used in the Study:

Peter Cameron, "Memorial Day"
Hjalmar Soderberg, "The Fur Coat"
Christopher Parker, "Garden Creatures: Riddles"
Yehuda Amichai, "A Song of Lies on Sabbath Eve"